DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 338 HE 025 312

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TITLE Drinking Games and University Students' Drinking Behavior.
PUB DATE 29 Mar 90
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology (York, England, March 29, 1990). For a related document, see HE 025 311.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alcohol Abuse; *College Students; *Drinking; Friendship; *Games; Higher Education; Interpersonal Competence; Interpersonal Relationship; Sex Differences; Social Behavior; Social Characteristics; Social Differences; Social Influences; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Drinking Games

ABSTRACT

An applied anthropological study was done of college student drinking games for insight into their role and function. Historical evidence suggests that drinking games have existed since ancient times, that such games encourage heavy drinking, and that despite awareness of the dangers associated with high levels of alcohol consumption, drinking games are common. The study was conducted through a set of extensive structured interviews with a sample group of self-declared game players. Results of the interviews suggested a tentative set of theories for the motivation to play drinking games. Particularly, students play games to facilitate social functioning; they participate in order to get drunk; males play to exert power and control over others; players participate to gain a closer relationship with someone; players wish to establish relationships and to establish their place in the order of the group; and students in established friendship groups move on from competitive games to non-competitive games. Analysis also suggests that drinking games are seen by the players as a "no loss option" group activity. Most participate to meet a social need, and those who fail to meet that need can blame their failure on drunkenness rather than take responsibility for their actions. (7 references) (JB)

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Drinking Games and University Students' Drinking Behavior

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HE 025 312

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology, University of York, York, England, March 29, 1990.

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DRINKING GAMES AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' DRINKING BEHAVIOR

Ian M. Newman, Ph.D., and Janet K. Crawford, Ph.D.

Alcohol consumption by adolescents and young adults is widely recognized as a major cause of premature death and disability. Accidents, suicide and homicide in the USA have been shown to be epidemiologically related to alcohol consumption. Motor vehicle deaths are repeatedly the principal cause of deaths among 15-24 year olds, accounting for an annual average of one-third of all deaths. The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, has set as a national goal the reduction in the proportion of adolescents 14-17 years of age who report acute drinking related problems to 14%, down from the present 17% by the year 2000 (US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1986).

United States undergraduate university students report drinking patterns that differ from their nonuniversity age mates. University students report a higher average annual prevalence of use (92% vs 87%) and a higher monthly prevalence (80% vs 72%) (Johnston, O'Malley & Backman, 1987).

For the remainder of this paper university undergraduate students will be referred to in the American vernacular as college students.

The most important difference between college students and their noncollege age mates is the reported occasions of heavy drinking (five

or more drinks in a row in the past two weeks). Forty-five percent report drinking at this level compared to 38% of noncollege age equivalents. This rate of heavy drinking among students has been on the increase for some time while the reverse has been true for noncollege young people. Most of this heavy drinking appears to occur on weekends (Johnston, O'Malley & Backman, 1987).

Examination of behaviors associated with heavy alcohol consumption among college students suggests that drinking games contribute to the tendency to consume large amounts of alcohol (Newman, Crawford & Nellis, 1988). Students say that a party isn't any fun without drinking games and that drinking games allow individuals to get drunk quickly. Drinking games enable the consumption of large quantities of alcohol because the rules of the game, rather than the individual, dictate when, and in some cases how much alcohol is consumed (Crawford & Nellis, 1988).

Drinking games are not new. Greek pottery and descriptions by Plato and others describe the Greek symposium where the "master of drinking" (symposiarch) threw the dice to determine how much water was to be added to the wine and determine the number of cups to be consumed. The Romans followed a similar tradition in their commissatio.

The Saxon King Edgar, at the urging of St. Dunston made a law that pegs were to be inserted at equal intervals in tankards so that drinkers

from a communal vessel would drink only half a pint and then pass the tankard. However instead of encouraging moderation the pegged tankards encouraged drinkers to see how much they could consume (Douglas, 1987).

Shakespeare's Falstaff, in *Henry V* "drank off candle-ends for flap dragons" referring to the game flap dragons in which a combustible object, such as a candle or alcohol soaked raisin, is set on fire and floated in a glass of ale which had to be drunk without getting burned. The tongue twisters of British pubs, the long repeated choruses used to test a man's ability to keep a clear head while drinking, represent a more contemporary version of a drinking game.

In 1987 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 94% of a sample of first year students admitted to drinking alcohol, and 70% of the males and 75% of the females reported playing a drinking game in the prior four weeks. A telephone survey of a sample of all classes of undergraduate students that same year reported 38% had played a drinking game in the previous four weeks. Typically more freshmen reported playing drinking games than upper class students (Crawford & Nellis, 1988).

Drinking games played by college students can be divided into five categories.

Consumption games. Consumption games are simple and to the point: the winner is the one who can consume the most alcohol in a given time or during a given event. Great praise is heaped on the winner.

Skill games. These games require a degree of skill. If a player fails to perform a certain feat, the player is required to drink. If a player successfully performs the feat, then he controls who has to drink. "Quarters" is perhaps the most popular skill game among US college students. (See attached description of Quarters.)

IQ games. IQ games require not only a degree of skill but also a degree of intellectual concentration. Failure at the game results in being required to drink. Bizz Buzz is an example of an IQ game. Players begin counting with the number 1 and whenever a multiple of seven occurs the player must say "Bizz:"; when a double number comes up, such as 22, the player must say "Buzz."

Unity games. Unity games are usually played by close friends in a noncompetitive atmosphere. When a common cue is heard, for example a word or sign on TV, the entire group must down their drink together.

Team games. Team games pit one team against another in any combination of the first three types of games just described.

Little has been written about drinking games beyond descriptions and historical accounts. The one exception is Hodges, in New Zealand, who has completed a serious study of drinking games among New Zealand males and written a Ph.D. dissertation on the topic.

The study reported here was conducted over an 18-month period. The initial phase consisted of participant observation of college student parties and ethnographic interviews conducted by a 30-year-old-female. The results of this phase contributed to the refinement of methods to be used in the latter part of the study which involved a set of extensive structured interviews on a sample of self-declared game players.

In this latter phase of the study twenty male and twenty females aged 21-25 were interviewed. Data gathered in these interviews and the earlier field work led to the formulation of a tentative theory of the role and function of drinking games, described here.

Negative Consequences. In light of the stated dangers associated with heavy alcohol consumption and the recognized negative consequences of drinking games a most intriguing question has to do with the reasons why students play drinking games. This question was really the focus of the project. Games, as suggested earlier, are very common despite apparently negative outcomes.

Forty percent of the males and 15% of the females reported negative consequences ranging from vomiting (67% males 76% females), hangovers (50% males 70% females), missing classes (50% males 41% females) and unconsciousness (25% males and 47% females). Not documented here but recognized as associated with game playing are rape and accidental death.

Quantity Consumed. Games clearly affect the quantity of alcohol consumed and did so disproportionately for females. Sixty-three male non-game-players in this study consumed an average of 6 ounces of beer in the 15-minute observational periods, while 57 male game-players consumed 18 ounces of beer on average in the same time period. The game in this case was Quarters. This difference between male game-players and non-game-players is insignificant, but this was not the case among females.

Sixty female non-game-players consumed an average of 4 ounces of beer compared to an average of 20 ounces of beer consumed by 57 female game-players in the same time period.

In an attempt to clarify reasons for participation in games we analyzed the content of indepth interviews and the earlier field notes. Here we propose a tentative theory of why college students played drinking games.

Drinking Games Facilitate Social Functioning. In dealing with health issues it is important to remember that negative health behaviors can offer significant nonhealth benefits. Participating in drinking games appears to be one such behavior. Jessor, Carman, & Grossman (1968) have identified social acceptance and interpersonal liking as major goals for students within a college environment. For some students, drinking alcohol was one means for achieving these goals. Alcohol depresses inhibitions and facilitates the establishment of interpersonal relationships. Playing drinking games provides a feeling of quickly fitting in and being accepted and liked.

So important appears to be the need to overcome the feeling of social discomfort associated with not belonging to a group and the need to move quickly to acceptance in social settings that "priming" occurs before parties to speed up the socializing process. A person reaches the party already having consumed alcohol and feeling comfortable and uninhibited, thus avoiding any social discomfort This priming facilitates participation in drinking games.

Newman, Crawford, and Nellis (1988) have suggested that drinking games themselves facilitate establishing contact with strangers. They comment that

> Willing participants in games join any number of others in a common and meaningful activity that quickly establishes relationships. The games themselves encourage drunkenness which further facilitates socializing.

In addition to the students' needs for social acceptance and interpersonal liking, there is also a need for academic success. Drinking games may provide an opportunity for those who have not achieved academically to compensate through the perceived successes associated with drinking games.

Willing Drunkenness Students participated in drinking games in order to "get drunk." Some students reported that the purpose in playing a drinking game was to get someone else drunk; however, for others, it was to get drunk themselves. Games provide a quick mechanism for the consumption of a large quantity of alcohol. A number of students reported they didn't particularly like the taste of beer, so games made it easier to consume the beer and gain the after affects, which they did like.

Males frequently acknowledged that one of the purposes of participating in drinking games was to "get drunk." Females, however, did not report this as one of their purposes in participating. Data from this study, however, showed clearly that women did get drunk as a result of drinking games, spent more time playing the games than males, and consumed more alcohol than males when they played the games. It appeared, therefore, that females also played drinking games for the purpose, albeit, the unstated purpose, of getting drunk.

Power. There is clear evidence that males in particular participated in drinking games to exert power and control over others. A number of individuals felt that an important motivation for participating in drinking games was the feeling of control that skilled game-players had over others. A person proficient in the game of Quarters, for example, could continually make a specific person drink. One student who was interviewed said

> ...if I can control someone else's alcohol intake through a game, I can also control their physical well-being, their sexual behavior, and possibly their academic and/or job performance the next day.

The skilled game-players appeared to be elevating their self-esteem and self-confidence through the degradation of someone else.

Focused Socializing Initial participation in a drinking game appears to meet a general need to socialize. The continued participation in drinking games however centered around what we call "focused socializing."

"Focused socializing" occurs once a person feels comfortable in the initial social setting and then moves to establish a closer relationship with a specific person. As a drinking game continues, some players feel more and more at ease in the game and the need for acceptance and socializing is met. At that point they can easily exit the game and avoid possibly negative consequences. For other individuals, the next step in the socializing process is an attempt to gain a closer

relationship with someone in the game, often someone of the opposite sex.

The game of Quarters provides an effective, informal, unspoken matching process where signals can be given and returned through the medium of the game (Newman, Crawford, and Nellis, 1988). For example, a male may repeatedly ask a specific female to consume the alcohol during his turn in Quarters. If the female, during her turn, asks the same male to consume the alcohol, a gesture has been returned, a bond has been created. Persons who have initiated relationships in this manner may find it easier to relate to each other following the game. Thus, a secondary coupling game (focused socializing) may be played under the guise of participating in drinking games.

Ordering the Social Group. Socializing implies establishing a relationship with others, as well as an ordering of relationships. Thus, drinking games provide a way for students to establish their place in the order of the group (Newman, Crawford, & Nellis, 1988). For example, the most skillful person at the table establishes for himself or herself a power position whereas the less skilled person has little if any power and control.

Game Maturity. Students interviewed reported that drinking games such as Quarters were often played by younger students who weren't as likely to have well defined friendship groups. Games provided a means to help define these friendship groups. Once established, the existence

of well-defined friendship groups appears to lessen the need to play competitive drinking games like Quarters, and persons moved on to play different types of games that tended to solidify friendships rather than establish them. Established couples, for example, were more likely than singles to participate in unity games, like "Hi Bob" , which are noncompetitive and emphasize togetherness and mutual enjoyment, meeting a need to relate to a social group.

Failure. Drinking games provide a "no loss option" for attempting to gain social acceptance and interpersonal liking. Players who satisfied their socializing and control needs through the game could stop drinking at will. On the other hand, players who failed to meet their socializing expectations often continued to play, despite increased intoxication, apparently in a vain attempt to gain the benefits of socialization. The inebriation resulting from continued play then provided a ready and acceptable face saving excuse for the failure to perform, socialize, or be liked. As with the classic alcoholic, the alcohol was blamed for the failure, not the individual.

A Tentative Theory

These initial observations link together in an ordered manner (Figure 1). Socializing is the central theme or priority. The initial motivation to participate in drinking games is the need for social acceptance and interpersonal liking. If a person satisfies the need for

acceptance, then game playing ceases to be of major importance or is played for different benefits.

For others, however, a feeling of initial acceptance is followed by a need for what could be called focused socializing. Game playing continues with the goal of creating a closer relationship with another individual in the game. If a player successfully establishes a relationship, then his need for focused socializing is met and his need to play the drinking game decreases, gaining him a level of control, responsibility and good feeling.

Failure to achieve a meaningful relationship or control over someone else, however, leads to further attempts to achieve this focused relationship by continuing to play drinking games which leads to intoxication. Intoxication and the continued playing of drinking games in turn leads to many negative outcomes recognized by all participants. However, the need to win acceptance and be liked or to gain a sense of control over someone else encourages continued trying, overriding the recognized negative consequences.

Even if negative outcomes occur during this process, the person can ultimately blame their failure on the fact that they were drunk and therefore not fully responsible for their actions. While they may not feel totally good about the negative outcomes, the fact that they can blame their failure on drunkenness or on alcohol and not have to accept the blame themselves, makes them "feel good," i.e., better than if they

had to accept the total blame themselves. Thus, even the negative outcomes can be rationalized away to the extent that playing the game can be justified, as well as the intention to play the game again. Participating in drinking games, in other words, is a no loss situation.

So powerful and effective is this phenomenon that it justified drinking games as the only entertainment at most parties. This power or effectiveness results from its no loss characteristics and the resulting "feeling good," no matter what happens in the drinking game situation.

It is possible for an individual with an interest in either general or focused socializing to move from general socializing or focused socializing directly to "feeling good." In addition, persons who have no interest in either type of socializing but are interested only in "getting drunk" can move quickly to "feeling good" by playing drinking games. Persons interested in only getting drunk see intoxication as synonymous with socializing and they feel good because the games provide them an acceptable excuse for intoxication.

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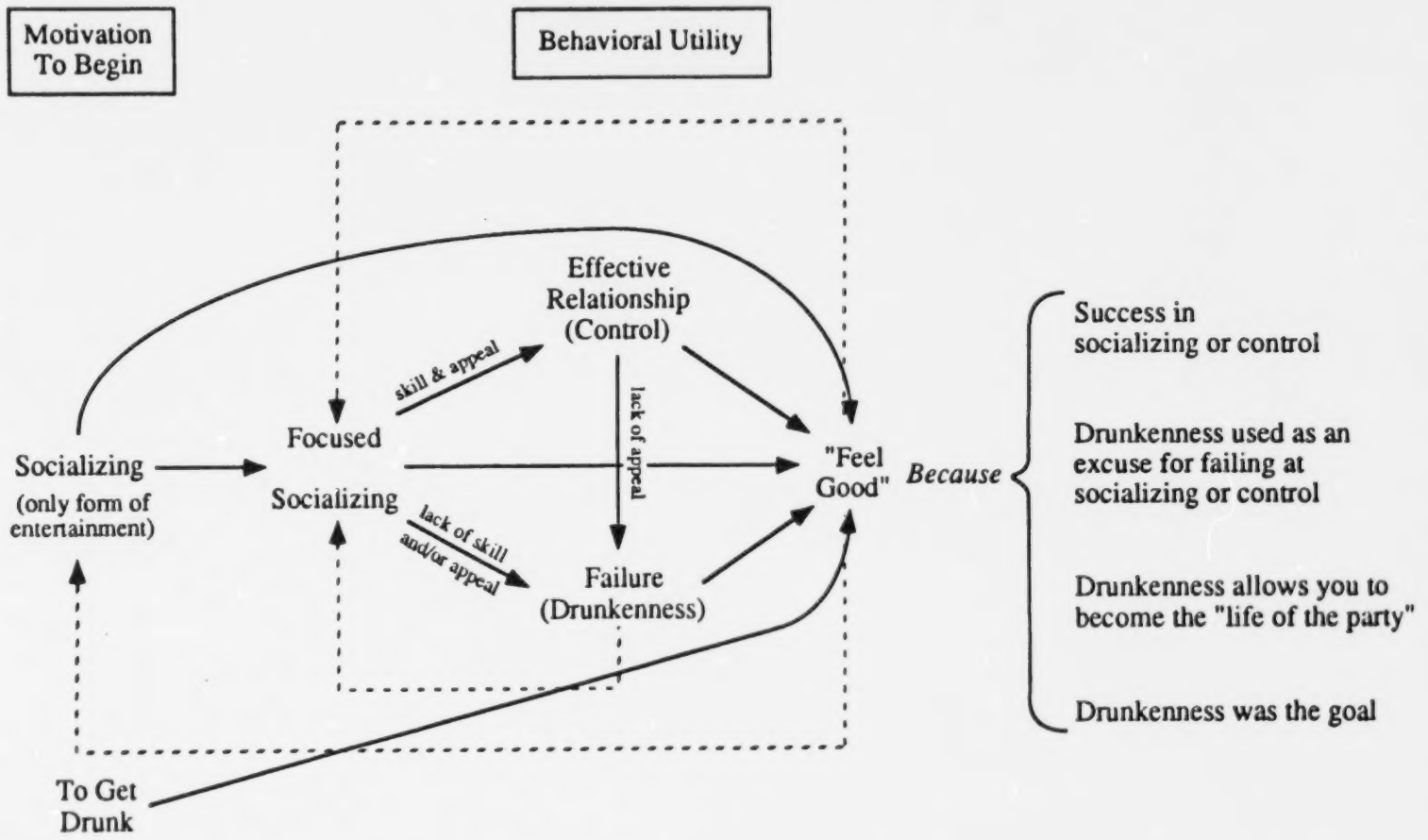
The Game of Quarters

Quarters begins with a full cup of beer placed in the center of the table. The players take turns trying to bounce a quarter (25-cent coin) off the table into the cup. Many variations of the game exist. At the University of Nebraska, it is most common for the player who successfully bounces the quarter into the cup to choose another player to drink all the beer in the cup. If the quarter misses the cup, the turn passes to the next player. The danger of the game, in addition to excessive alcohol consumption, is the risk of swallowing the quarter. Among 45 students in a freshman orientation class who had played Quarters in the previous four weeks, 4 males and 6 females reported swallowing a quarter (Crawford & Nellis, 1988).

Figure 1

Relationship Of Significant Concepts In Explaining Drinking Game Behavior


Motivation To Begin
Behavioral Utility
Effective Relationship (Control)
skill & appeal
lack of appeal
Focused Socializing
lack of skill and/or appeal
Failure (Drunkenness)
Socializing (only form of entertainment)
"Feel Good"
Because
Success in socializing or control
Drunkenness used as an excuse for failing at socializing or control
Drunkenness allows you to become the "life of the party"
Drunkenness was the goal
To Get Drunk